

# The 5-Point Plan

## *Fostering Successful Partnerships With Families of Students With Disabilities*

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*Listen. Plan. Listen some more.  
Train. Collaborate. Become a resource.  
Consider culture—and civil rights.  
Communicate, provide interpreters,  
reach out, ask questions, give respect.  
These are just some ways teachers  
can improve how they work with  
the families of their students  
with disabilities. And make no  
mistake, family involvement is  
a great predictor of growth and  
well-being for these students.*

Teachers play many roles in the lives of students with disabilities: instructor, advocate, listener, problem solver, and the list goes on. If their goal is to impact their students' lives in pervasive and sustainable ways, however, teachers must also play the role of partner to their students' families and help them in supporting their children's needs (Angell, Stoner, & Shelden, 2009; Colarusso & O'Rourke, 2007). One of the original intents of special education legislation, beginning with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Pub. L. No.

94-142, 1975), was to involve those who knew the students best and worked with them most consistently (i.e., their families) in the educational process (Pruitt, Wandry, & Hollums, 1998).

As the legal responsibilities of teachers have evolved, however, federal law has mandated intensive family-centered planning and collaboration at only one level—early childhood (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Pub. L. No. 99-457 of 1986; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Whereas family participation is a required component of individualized education programs (IEPs), students, rather than students and their families, are often the central focus of planning for school-based and transition services (Harry, 2004, 2008).

Despite a lack of specific mandates for family-centered planning beyond the early childhood years, the home environment and family involvement in the education of students with disabilities have a significant effect on students' development (Beveridge, 2005; Dyson, 2010). In turn, partnering

with families has shown significant benefits for all those involved, including students with disabilities, across ages and grade levels (Colarusso & O'Rourke, 2007; Ryan, 1995). In addition, teachers have a special opportunity to provide both services to the student and assistance to the family (Beckman, 2002). Addressing both stu-





dent and family needs can help reduce stressors related to rearing children with disabilities and support higher levels of family health and adjustment.

Helping families and finding successful ways to collaborate with them must continue to be a priority for educators throughout a student's school experience. Because of the vital nature

of parent-teacher partnerships, we would like to highlight important tactics for forming just such a collaborative relationship. In this article, we outline a 5-Point Plan for teachers to use in developing parent-teacher relationships that can potentially benefit families, students, and all involved in a student's educational process.

### **The 5-Point Plan**

The 5-Point Plan consists of strategies for effectively communicating and collaborating with families of students with disabilities. These strategies condense the 12 "principles of effective help-giving" delineated by Dünst and Trivette (1994, p. 167) with the goal of

highlighting the role of teachers as help givers with families:

- 1** Be positive, proactive, and solution oriented.
- 2** Respect families' roles and cultural backgrounds in their children's lives.
- 3** Communicate consistently, listen to families' concerns, and work together.
- 4** Consider simple, natural supports that meet individual needs of students.
- 5** Empower families with knowledge and opportunities for involvement in the context of students' global needs.

They are further broken down in Figures 1 through 5 into individual strategies applicable to teachers seeking to support families of children with disabilities. Dunst and Trivette conclude that help giving is most effective when its goal is to enable families to meet their own needs, solve their own problems, and achieve their own goals. Thus, teachers should provide support that allows families to be independent and develop a sense of control in their lives in terms of raising and supporting their children with disabilities.

Educators should use these strategies in ways that help families stand on their own, rather than make them dependent on the teacher. Teachers should also realize that some of these suggestions may already be in place, either in the general education classroom or through a special education teacher interacting with families. The goal of the 5-Point Plan is not to promote a complete overhaul of current practices. Instead, the aim of the plan is to support and enhance positive strategies teachers are already using in their daily practice and encourage use of additional strategies when needed. To address both professional and practical questions, we define each point, describe specific teacher actions, and use research to demonstrate that each point is supported by evidence-based practices.

### **Point 1: Be positive, proactive, and solution oriented.**

Being positive, proactive, and solution oriented means focusing on strengths, accomplishments, and ways to over-

resilience (Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Hammond, 2007; Webster-Stratton & Fjone, 1989). To this end, maintain a focus on students' growth and successes and share these with families whenever possible. For example, you

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come deficits and barriers (see Figure 1). When working with students with disabilities, remember that despite the challenges present, raising children with a disability is no less rewarding or fulfilling than raising children without disabilities (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000; Wilgosh, Nota, Scorgie, & Salvatore, 2004). Maintaining this focus by engaging in positive parenting and nurturing students with disabilities is an essential protective factor for families in building their children's

may send intermittent e-mails or written notes home or make phone calls to point out something positive that happened at school, rather than waiting for a report card or progress note to highlight achievement.

Be proactive by gaining insight from families (Resch et al., 2010). Ask families about their children's strengths and areas of need, what has worked in the past, and any information that families deem important for teachers to know. In addition, research (Dyson, 2010)

### **Figure 1. Point 1 Strategies**

#### **Point 1: Be positive, proactive, and solution oriented.**

- Send home a concise, easy-to-read description of your classroom expectations at the beginning of the year. List some of the potential consequences for meeting or not meeting expectations (e.g., reinforcers and punishers).
- Call families during the first week of school to share at least one positive thing their child has done at school.
- Share three positive comments about students for every one negative comment.
- Make a regular homework schedule, so families know what to expect each night and can set up a routine (e.g., 20 minutes of reading per night + math worksheet on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and spelling on Tuesdays and Thursdays). Then, send home a description of your homework policy and schedule.
- Ask families to sign and return cover sheet on the items above, so you know they have received them.
- Send home clear directions with homework assignments instead of relying on students to remember directions you gave during class.
- Research specific disabilities of students in your class, while keeping in mind the fact that all students, even those who have the same disability, are unique.
- When discussing problems through notes or phone, always present ideas for possible solutions (e.g., "Tomorrow, we are going to try \_\_\_\_\_ to be more successful").

shows that families report concerns with their children being labeled by schools and being judged or categorized based on this label. Thus, a way in which you can be positive, proactive, and solution-oriented is to identify students' specific successes both in school and at home, acknowledge individual needs, and find specific ways to support these needs, rather than focusing on a label or a weakness.

**Point 2: Respect families' roles and cultural backgrounds in their children's lives.**

Respecting families' roles and cultural backgrounds in their children's lives includes both recognizing and incorporating families' identities, knowledge, and distinctive perspectives on their children in the educational process (see Figure 2). When you interact with families, remember that teachers and families play different roles in students' lives and often have different perspectives from which they view the world. Most central to this strategy is that families are the experts on their children and their strengths and needs (Beckman, 2002). Some families of children with disabilities also show an increased ability to perceive their children's needs (Sperling & Mowder, 2006). In turn, you can acknowledge this ability by asking for input in solving or preventing difficulties and listening to families' perspectives when developing IEPs. In becoming the experts on their children, many families seek research and disability-specific information from a variety of sources, such as doctors and support groups (Trainor, 2010). Though you should possess adequate knowledge about specific disabilities, you also should acknowledge the families' ability to contribute by asking if there is any disability-specific information they would like to share and what sources they would recommend to gain new information.

Although students with disabilities already comprise a specific group of individuals, these students also represent increasingly varied cultural backgrounds, as well (Trainor, 2010). To acknowledge these diverse back-

**Figure 2. Point 2 Strategies**

**Point 2: Respect families' roles and cultural backgrounds in their children's lives.**

- Ask families (in person or through questionnaire) for information regarding their children (e.g., likes, dislikes, accomplishments, struggles, strategies that have worked in the past). Do this at the beginning of each year and whenever a new student is placed in your classroom or on your caseload.
- Ask families if there is any disability-specific information they would like to share with you or any information sources they would recommend, so that you can gain more knowledge about their child's disability.
- Ask families about any accommodations they make for their student at home that they are comfortable sharing and that may be helpful at school.
- Give families the choice of whether or not to be involved in drafting goals and services. If they choose not to, respect their decision and always review all goals and services with them after they have been drafted.
- Discuss or ask for information regarding the student's total needs (e.g., social, behavioral, academic, health), rather than focusing only on academic needs.
- Ask families if they would like an interpreter at meetings, if applicable, and remind them they are welcome to invite another family member or friend who could interpret as needed.
- Attend a community event or activity in which the family participates to get to know them better and demonstrate your commitment to their child.
- Ask families if there is anything they would like you to know about themselves or their family that may help you better serve their child.

grounds, address cultural differences both in the classroom and in communication with families to make them feel more comfortable engaging in collaborative relationships with you and other teachers (Resch et al., 2010). You may accomplish this cultural sensitivity, for example, by asking if families would like an interpreter at meetings and by inquiring about information on the families' culture that may help you better understand the student. In addition, though families value education in similar ways across socioeconomic status (SES) settings, studies indicate that those of lower SES may feel more comfortable with teachers taking the lead in decision making than families of higher SES (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). You can respect these tendencies by providing all families with opportunities for decision making but responding sensitively with additional input or guidance for families that may need more support.

**Point 3: Communicate consistently, listen to families' concerns, and work together.**

Consistent communication and collaboration involves creating and using methods to share information and giving families a way to voice questions and concerns, as well as share information from home (see Figure 3). Families of students with disabilities report a need for consistent information regarding their children's performance in school as soon as the disability is diagnosed (Resch et al., 2010). As students' school careers advance, families continue to express an increased desire for communication with teachers to relieve the stress they feel over students' struggles and to clarify questions about students' self-reports on school events (Angell et al., 2009). Families also express anger and distrust when services or communication are inconsistent or delayed without explanation. Thus, you must communicate

### Figure 3. Point 3 Strategies

**Point 3:** Communicate consistently, listen to parent's concerns, and work together.

- Keep families informed regarding performance and progress on evaluations. These assessments can take a long time, and families may appreciate hearing occasional updates, so they know the process is moving forward.
- If there are delays in testing and implementation of new services, develop an action plan for addressing problems until the situation is resolved. Communicate this action plan to families.
- Talk about the student without referring to their disability or label unless necessary.
- Give families a schedule of when you are available for phone conferences and your policy on returning communication (e.g., 36 hours for phone calls and e-mails, 1 school day for notes).
- Ask families if they would like to set up a communication schedule (e.g., 10-minute phone call on Thursday afternoons, e-mails on Fridays summing up the week's accomplishments). If you set up a schedule, make sure to stick to it to help families maintain their trust in you.
- Contact families about concerns as soon as they arise. Write out the information you plan to share ahead of time, so you are sure to cover all important points.
- Talk with each student's general education teacher and special area teachers as frequently as possible. This will ensure you are giving the families consistent information and reports on progress. It may help to set up a weekly 15- to 20-minute appointment with general education teachers and monthly appointment with special area teachers.
- Talk to families about ideas for home-school connections for the student (e.g., mutual communication through home-school folder, use of teacher web page on district site, or parent reports of success at home or photos or pictures of family activities to be shared during morning meeting).

consistently with families, sharing information families identify as important for their children's success. For some, this information may include knowing with whom their children played at recess, whereas for others it may be accomplished by providing weekly updates on academic progress.

Families also place great importance on collaboration and feeling as though they are working with the teacher for the benefit of their children (Angell et al., 2009). Collaboration becomes more essential to families when students with disabilities are placed in inclusive settings with high demands and more students. Consider adopting a stronger family-centered focus in which you examine the needs of the whole family when planning for the child's education (Dunst, 2002). Create a family-

centered focus by listening to families' concerns, identifying areas of their children's education they deem particularly important; and addressing these concerns both informally, such as using daily or weekly notes, and formally, such as incorporating them into the IEP.

**Point 4:** Consider simple, natural supports that meet individual needs of students.

Consider simple, natural supports in a student's current environment to utilize student's strengths and support his or her specific areas of weakness (see Figure 4). Families often articulate a desire for natural supports that meet their children's individual needs, such as considering the effect of physical disabilities on fine motor skills or of

language impairments on students' communication (Angell et al., 2009). Families also express satisfaction when teachers treat their contributions and suggestions as feasible options for providing support in the school setting (Pruitt et al., 1998). Thus, you should frequently report to families the areas in which accommodations may be needed, share proposed supports, and solicit input. Families often devise ways of helping their children and give them coping mechanisms that encourage success and independence, such as routines for daily activities (Dyson,



2010). Because these supports are often natural and individualized, they could both increase their children's school success, as well as provide a link between school and home if employed in the classroom environment. Examples may include using specific routines children follow during meal-times at home or in the cafeteria or using a token economy at school to earn time with a preferred game or activity at home.

Families often have difficulty finding programming and services in the community sufficient to meet their chil-

#### Figure 4. Point 4 Strategies

**Point 4:** Consider simple, natural supports that meet individual needs of students.

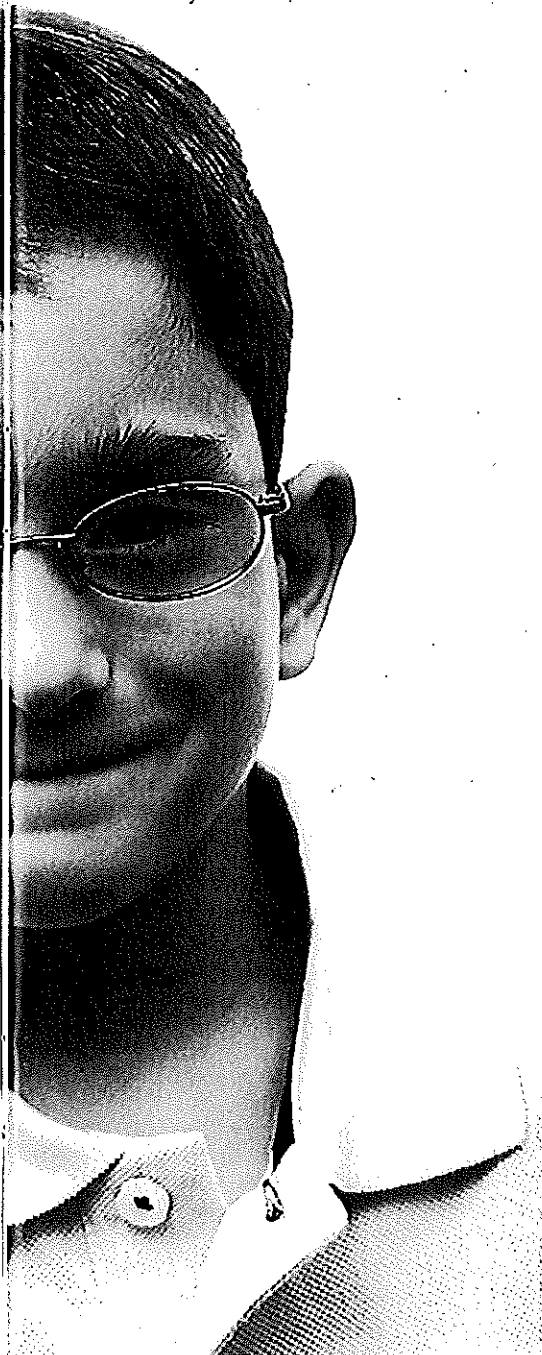
- Ask families what supports they use at home with students and how students respond to these supports.
- Discuss accommodations and modifications you are considering using with families. Families may not agree with certain supports you are trying to provide and may not support them as readily at home. Ask families to share any concerns they have before implementation.
- Be flexible in managing behavior and be prepared to implement individualized strategies in your classroom. Communicate strategies to families and explain why you believe they will be beneficial. Ask families for input on strategies and share any concerns they may have about behavior plans before implementation.
- Be flexible in changing accommodations, modifications, and strategies as needed. Communicate to families the changes and the reasons for changes.
- Avoid using generalizations as explanations for behavior (e.g., "I have boys. I know what they're like" or "All middle schoolers act like this"). Instead, state specific behaviors and the functions they appear to serve (e.g., "He has been making inappropriate comments in class. When he does, all the kids laugh and he smiles. It seems like he's doing this to get their attention").
- Ask families if they are in need of supports at home and if there is any information or suggestions you could provide that may help. Offer more extensive, specific advice only when solicited and ask for feedback on any suggestions given. Take this feedback into consideration before offering more suggestions.
- If families need more information on how to find cost-effective services or get funding, with their permission, put them in touch with the school's social worker or give them contact information for relevant local services.

dren's needs (Keller & Honig, 2004). When families do locate adequate programs, accessing funds often becomes the next obstacle, especially when families seek supports such as respite services (Agosta & Melda, 1995; Resch et al., 2010). To this end, you can step out of the traditional, classroom-based role and provide families with information on available services, sources of funding, and ideas for how to access both. Of course, you must clearly state that you cannot promise procurement of funds or services; providing this valuable information can help build a relationship families view as collaborative and beneficial outside of the school context. You can find this information through a variety of avenues, including speaking to colleagues at their school, collaborating

with school-based career or guidance counselors (depending on the student's age), and contacting outreach and community-involvement programs at local universities or disability services organizations. Many of these organizations have already compiled information that you may obtain and hand out to families. Gaining such information ahead of time allows more time in your day for communicating with families and planning for students.

**Point 5:** Empower families with knowledge and opportunities for involvement in the context of students' global needs.

It is important to help families access the information and tools necessary for the support of their children, both in and out of the classroom. One of





## Figure 5. Point 5 Strategies

### Point 5: Empower families with knowledge and opportunities for involvement in the context of students' global needs.

- Create a packet of information on local services for people with disabilities, as well as inclusive community agencies and activities. Indicate the disability groups and ages each resource serves. Some families may appreciate the entire packet, whereas others might want information specific to their children's age or disabilities.
- Give information on cost of services in the packet. Include details on how to find cost-effective services or funding for students with disabilities to participate in services or activities.
- Provide information on local support groups for families of students with disabilities through which they may gain information and strategies for supporting their child.
- Provide families with frequent opportunities to make choices about their children's education (e.g., subject areas to focus on with homework, types of homework that work best for the family, individualized reinforcers to provide that match child preferences).
- Ask families to share what types of information about their student they find most valuable. Share this information whenever possible.
- Offer parent trainings and education nights to address specific concerns shared by families (e.g., managing behavior at home, providing summer activities, working on academics over breaks).
- Encourage school and community organizations to involve and support students with disabilities (e.g., talk to high school or local sports teams' booster clubs about providing seating for people with physical disabilities, offer training to local day cares and after-school programs on supporting children with disabilities and behavior problems).

the most commonly reported challenges in rearing children with disabilities is a feeling of a loss of control (Dyson, 2010). Families note that they feel isolated from the world around them, including schools and the community (Freedman & Boyer, 2000; Worcester, Nesman, Raffaele Mendez, & Keller, 2008). You can help families restore a sense of control by consistently providing information—not just related to the students' education but also to the students' broader needs (see Figure 5).

You should first ask what information would be helpful to families, rather than assuming what their needs are and sharing information that families may find unimportant or condescending (Pruitt et al., 1998). These needs may include information on their children's civil and educational rights;

accessing community resources; finding available disability services; or addressing academic, behavioral, and social skills at home (Dyson, 2010; Olkin, 1997). For interested families, provide information on training pro-

grams, primarily those focusing on reinforcing academic skills and managing problem behaviors. Providing such educational programs is an effective way to increase knowledge and empowerment, enhance students' success across environments, and link

school and home (Reid et al., 2007; Trainor, 2010). Gaining such knowledge assists families in making positive decisions for the children's continued growth and development and providing for children's unique needs (Dyson, 2010).

In addition, families of students with disabilities, especially those who feel they have had to fight for services they believed were appropriate for their children, also report feeling isolated from the school and opportunities to become involved in the school community (Resch et al., 2010). You can combat this feeling of disconnect and increase empowerment by providing consistent information on how and when families can attend school functions, become involved in school committees, or volunteer with other teachers and families. In addition, consider joining local, state, and national organizations, such as the Council for Exceptional Children ([cec.sped.org](http://cec.sped.org)).

### Final Thoughts

Families' involvement in their children's education stands out as one of the greatest predictors of growth and well-being for students with disabilities (Elliott & Mullins, 2004; Resch et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, when teachers strive to build working partnerships with families of students with disabilities, home-school collaboration and, in turn, student achievement increases (Angell et al., 2009; Jaynes, 2007). The goal of the 5-Point Plan is to provide teachers with concrete examples of how to initiate and sustain collabora-

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tive relationships with families in which families receive the support and resources they need to build their children's futures.

As teachers strive to construct these relationships, they see the effect that positive partnerships that

acknowledge, respect, and empower families can have on students. The field of special education is still struggling to match school resources, community resources, and teacher practices with families' needs (Resch et al., 2010). By basing collaborative relationships on an exchange of information, strategies, and resources between teachers and families, teachers can help families solidify their resilience and self-sufficiency and support families' active involvement in their children's education (Lloyd & Hastings, 2009). The 5-Point Plan can serve as a tool through which teachers fulfill this role as help givers to families and more globally meet both parent and student needs.

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